

Best Tours in Asia 2014

From *National Geographic Traveler* Magazine's 2014 Tours of a Lifetime



By Margaret Loftus

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia: Caucasus Culture Club

This specialist in travel to post-Soviet states has plumbed the rich culture of the Caucasus to deliver an itinerary with uncommon access, from a recital by Armenia's Luys Quintet to a private tour of the Atashgyakh Temple, built on a natural gas vent some 400 years ago by fire worshippers. *Exeter International*: "Discovery of the Caucasus," 12 days; \$4,675 (Tbilisi-Baku flight and some meals not included); www.exeterinternational.com

India: The High Road

From the desert landscape of Tibetan Buddhist Ladakh to the verdant mountains of Muslim-influenced Kashmir, the outfitter's signature journey spans India's spectacularly scenic Trans-Himalaya, with stops for home visits and archery lessons along the way. *Wild Frontiers*: "High Road to Kashmir," 15 days; \$3,932; www.wildfrontierstravel.com

Iraq: Hello, Kurdistan

Now that it's no longer grabbing daily headlines, this land of stark beauty and hospitable people is ripe for exploration. Join one of the few operators who have ventured here, from the cosmopolitan capital, Arbil, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, to the mountain village of Ahmed Awa, where you'll connect with locals for a Friday afternoon picnic. *Explore!*: "Highlights of Iraqi Kurdistan," 8 days; \$3,840; www.exploreworldwide.com

China: Far West Tibet

Kicking off in Lhasa, this odyssey ventures where few travelers do. Marvel at the pyramid-shaped Tholing Monastery, walk among the nomad camps of the vast Chang Tang plateau, and pitch your tent on the banks of Lake Mansarovar. *WildChina*: "Expedition to Tibet's Far West," 21 days; \$5,810; www.wildchina.com

India: Kayak Nirvana

Paddle the lush Kerala backwaters—a sprawling labyrinth of interconnected channels, lagoons, and lakes—and regroup at colonial villas for cooking lessons and ayurvedic treatments (extra cost). Stay two nights at an organic farm in the foothills of the Western Ghats. *Hidden Places Travel: "Kerala: Kayaking, Culture, and Cuisine,"* 12 days; \$3,750; www.hiddenplaces.net

Jordan: Sands of Time

These American expats conversant in Arabic “burst the tourist bubble,” says client Kathleen Weiss. “We camped and ate with Bedouin.” *Engaging Cultures Travel: "Jordan Insider,"* 10 days; \$2,199; www.engagingcultures.com

Myanmar: Burma Cruise

This luxury operator has long been a fixture in the country. Now it's launched the 50-passenger *Orcaella*, nimble enough to ply the less traveled Chindwin River to find the remote Mahar Minkyaung monastery, home to the “Shwe Sagar” Buddha, carved from a single tree trunk some thousand years ago. *Belmond: "Discovering the Chindwin River Aboard the Orcaella,"* 12 days; \$5,610; www.belmond.com

Philippines: Terraced Wonders

Built into mountainsides 2,000 years ago, the Banaue rice terraces are a UNESCO World Heritage site. Explore these engineering marvels and share in rice rituals with descendants of the Ifugao people who created them. *Remote Lands: "The Philippines: Trekking the Terraces and Beyond,"* 7 days; \$3,230; remotelands.com

Vietnam: Teach, Eat, Wander

Spend two weeks in Hanoi teaching English to youngsters, whose job prospects are vastly improved by speaking the primary language of the Internet. Late afternoon and weekends are free for finding the best *pho*, appreciating the burgeoning contemporary art scene, and spying giant turtles in Hoan Kiem Lake. *Global Volunteers: "Vietnam Volunteer Program,"* 14 days; \$4,790; www.globalvolunteers.org

Israel, West Bank: Bridges to Peace

This journey was designed in partnership with Arabs and Jews and inspired by the peace-building efforts of National Geographic Emerging Explorer Aziz Abu Sarah, who also leads the trip. *National Geographic Expeditions: "The Holy Land: Past, Present, and Future,"* 12 days; \$5,795; www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com

Malaysia, Indonesia: Islands of the East

The new *National Geographic Orion* plies the South China Sea on the way to Borneo. Meet with National Geographic grantee Biruté Galdikas at Camp Leakey, the orangutan research station she established. *National Geographic Expeditions: "Wild Encounters From Borneo to Bali,"* 13 days; from \$8,680; www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com

China, Nepal: Peak Performance

Renowned mountaineer Peter Hillary leads this overland expedition from the Tibetan Plateau to the North Face Base Camp of Mount Everest and into Nepal. *National Geographic Expeditions: "Tibet and Nepal: Journey to the Highest Himalaya,"* 16 days; \$8,325; www.nationalgeographicexpeditions.com

Contributing editor **Margaret Loftus** has reported and written “Tours of a Lifetime” for the past nine years.